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Preliminary Report No. 5

URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES for SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco Department of City Planning
July 1970

Thomas R. Aidala, A.I.A.
Consultant

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PREFACE

Urban Design Principles for San Francisco is the fifth in a series of eight preliminary reports prepared as part of the Urban Design Study. Each report presents a different phase of work leading to the formulation of urban design plans and policies for San Francisco. The reports are intended to inform the public and civic leaders of the study's progress and through the feedback they generate enable the staff to make their work more responsive to citizen concerns.

The urban design principles set forth in this report are an important contribution to the development of the citywide, district and sub-neighborhood design plans that are to be the final product of this study. More than other preliminary reports, Urban Design Principles will have a continuing value. It is in itself a kind of "plan" for action. It will be used by the Department of City Planning staff as a basis for evaluating plans that come before them for review. Hopefully, it will also be used by other City departments, and by private developers and architects. While it does not offer a solution to every problem, it provides a checklist of urban design considerations for building in San Francisco.

The "design principles" that comprise this report can only be called a beginning. With each new project studied and reviewed by the Department, they will be added to, detailed and refined. Concerned architects and urban designers in the community may be expected to contribute their expertise from time to time. The result of these efforts will be a design manual that, if made working policy for all building, will significantly aid in preserving and enhancing the unique qualities of San Francisco.

A first step toward this goal is the designation of this report as the Department of City Planning's statement of urban design principles. As such this report will become a basis for all future design review by the Department. The endorsement by other City departments, agencies and commissions, and by professional, business and neighborhood organizations will assist in making these principles working policy for the city's future development. Public support will strengthen this report's usefulness as a tool to protect and enhance the unique character of San Francisco.

BACKGROUND

San Francisco is a special place. Each year hundreds of thousands of visitors come to view, explore and experience the city. It is sought as a place of residence and as a center for business because of its location, beauty, charm and urbanity. San Francisco's unique image -- made up of equal parts topography, natural setting and design tradition -- is an important ingredient of its attractiveness. The interaction of these parts is a prime key to its success.

San Francisco's design tradition is characterized by a rectangular street grid applied over all but the steepest hills; by small-scale buildings closely lining the streets and giving sharp definition to the street space; and by interesting street facades. The grid pattern and small-scale buildings, when laid over the rolling landscape, act to dramatize and heighten the form of the hills and create city views known throughout the world. The street facades enriched by bay windows, ornate cornices, and intricate varied entranceways, impart visual interest and human scale to the tightly contained streets.

When this design tradition is deviated from or not taken into account the net effect is to weaken and erode the qualities that make San Francisco so special. This erosion is occurring throughout the city in many ways: by the creation of bleak, monotonous street facades that make our streets increasingly unpleasant places to be; by building out of scale with surrounding buildings; and by the proliferation of parking lots and other areas that destroy well-defined street spaces by substituting expanses of asphalt. This kind of "progress" is not necessary. Here and there new thoughtfully conceived development has occurred serving both contemporary needs and maintaining traditional design principles. It is possible for San Francisco to grow without forfeiting its heritage.

While the character of certain parts of the city is being weakened, other areas have suffered because the generative design principles were not reflected in their development. In these usually newer areas the street facades often lack interesting details to entertain the eye. Garage doors and driveways are too often the dominant eye-level features. They are clearly places for cars, not for people. Such areas need corrective, not preventive action.

The rediscovery and application of the fundamental design principles that have historically shaped San Francisco does not imply a static, never-changing city; nor does it mean we should attempt to copy the past slavishly. The urban design principles and values involved are compatible with contemporary architecture and can be creatively adapted to evolving needs.

THE USE OF THIS REPORT

With each new building or public improvement the face of San Francisco is changed. Many small changes over a period of time can have as significant an impact on the city as a single major development. This report looks at the kinds of things -- large and small -- that are being done in the city and analyzes how they are good or bad. The objective of this analysis was to identify and define the urban design principles and values that should apply to the physical development of San Francisco.

Decisions shaping San Francisco's physical development are made by many people in both public and private positions: members of the Board of Education, Art Commissioners, merchants, businessmen, builders, architects, City Planning Commissioners, sign makers, and even the individual renovating his own home. How the city will look in future years depends upon the collective actions of all these people. Present legal controls

prohibit only the most gross abuses. Some people would argue that they do not do even that. The responsibility, then, rests on the individual decision makers. The way the city will look depends upon the sensitivity, taste and judgment each of these people brings to his work.

Four ways of using this report were anticipated: 1. to provide a basis for design review work by the Department of City Planning where such review is appropriate, such as with many conditional uses and Master Plan referrals; 2. to assist design review and serve as an idea book for other City agencies, commissions and departments making urban design decisions affecting the city; 3. as a means for alerting architects, builders, and developers of the City's design concerns; and 4. for use as a general educational document calling public attention to the city's many design problems and issues.

In the Department of City Planning's day-to-day work Urban Design Principles will facilitate early discussions with architects and developers. More importantly the report will provide a systematic basis for the design review of conditional use applications, Master Plan referrals and discretionary review cases. Design terms of reference or criteria will no longer have to be developed ad hoc for each new case.

This report can serve a similar function for the Art Commission, Board of Education, Redevelopment Agency and Department of Public Works. In this regard it offers a much needed element: a common set of design principles and values. Public projects can be more readily reviewed and coordinated if the parties involved share the same design objectives.

Builders, developers and architects will be alerted by this report to the urban design issues so they may anticipate City concerns. This can save both the developer and the City costly review time and much wasted effort. The report lends itself for use as a convenient urban design checklist.

Insofar as this report helps call public attention to both the small-scale and the major developments that threaten to disfigure San Francisco's fragile charm, it is an educational document. The protection of San Francisco's special character cannot be left to a few select groups. It is the business of everyone who loves and enjoys the city. Citizen organizations may find this report a useful checklist for "action".

A first step toward the four uses outlined above is the endorsement of the urban design principles in this report by the Department of City Planning. Similar endorsement by other public boards, commissions, departments and organizations will further strengthen this report's value as a tool for improving San Francisco.

APPROACH & ORGANIZATION

This report attempts to identify fundamental rules governing the methods of achieving aesthetic and functional urban design goals and objectives for San Francisco. These rules or "principles" center upon ten urban design concerns basic to all urban design goals. In varying degrees they are involved in every design situation.

Amenity/Comfort: the livability or habitable qualities of the urban environment.

Visual Interest: the visually pleasing qualities of a given urban setting; usually but not necessarily an inherent aspect of a livable environment.

Activity: the movement of people walking, playing, window shopping, shopping, dining, etc., adding interest and excitement to areas of the city.

Clarity and Convenience: the clarity of right-of-way and ease of movement along pedestrian and vehicular pathways.

Character/Distinctiveness: those special physical characteristics of a structure or area that set it apart from surroundings and contribute to its individuality.

Definition of Space: the clarity and ease of perception of the shape and form of exterior space.

Views: the ability to see out of a space, to orient oneself in relation to surroundings, or to view pleasing vistas of the city.

Variety/Contrast: those differences in building styles and arrangement, street patterns and topography that set buildings and/or areas apart. It contributes to identifiable neighborhood areas and to points of interest within the community.

Harmony/Compatibility: the pleasing relationship of buildings to each other and the topography; the absence of jarring, discordant differences in scale or design.

Scale and Pattern: scale refers to the size, bulk and massiveness of buildings. "Human scaled" surroundings are generally more comfortable because they do not overwhelm the individual. Pattern refers to the textural effect of building scale viewed from a distance.

Each of these design concerns is touched upon in varying combinations in this report. They comprise the basic measurements by which designs are evaluated. At first glance some may appear contradictory; in practice they modify each other. The objective to achieve variety and contrast, for example, is modified in degree by the concern to harmonize with existing scale or other quality of an area.

The emphasis of this report is upon public space and the public and private actions which give it its form and character. In particular it focuses upon the city's streets which constitute the largest amount of public open space in the city and where residents often spend most of their outdoor time. This is also the area where the public sector has the greatest amount of control.

The report is divided into three sections. It starts with the basic organizing framework of the city: the city streets. Here it examines those qualities that make streets pleasant places to be in. The second section looks at those relationships between abutting buildings and the street that impart interest, unity and a pleasing comfortable scale to the streetscape. The point of view in the third section is enlarged even further, analyzing the interrelationships among the street system, buildings and topography. As presented, the three sections are cumulative, building upon and reinforcing each other.

Section 1: STREETS

Those qualities of the street pavement, furniture and sidewalk that help make streets more pleasant comfortable places to be in.

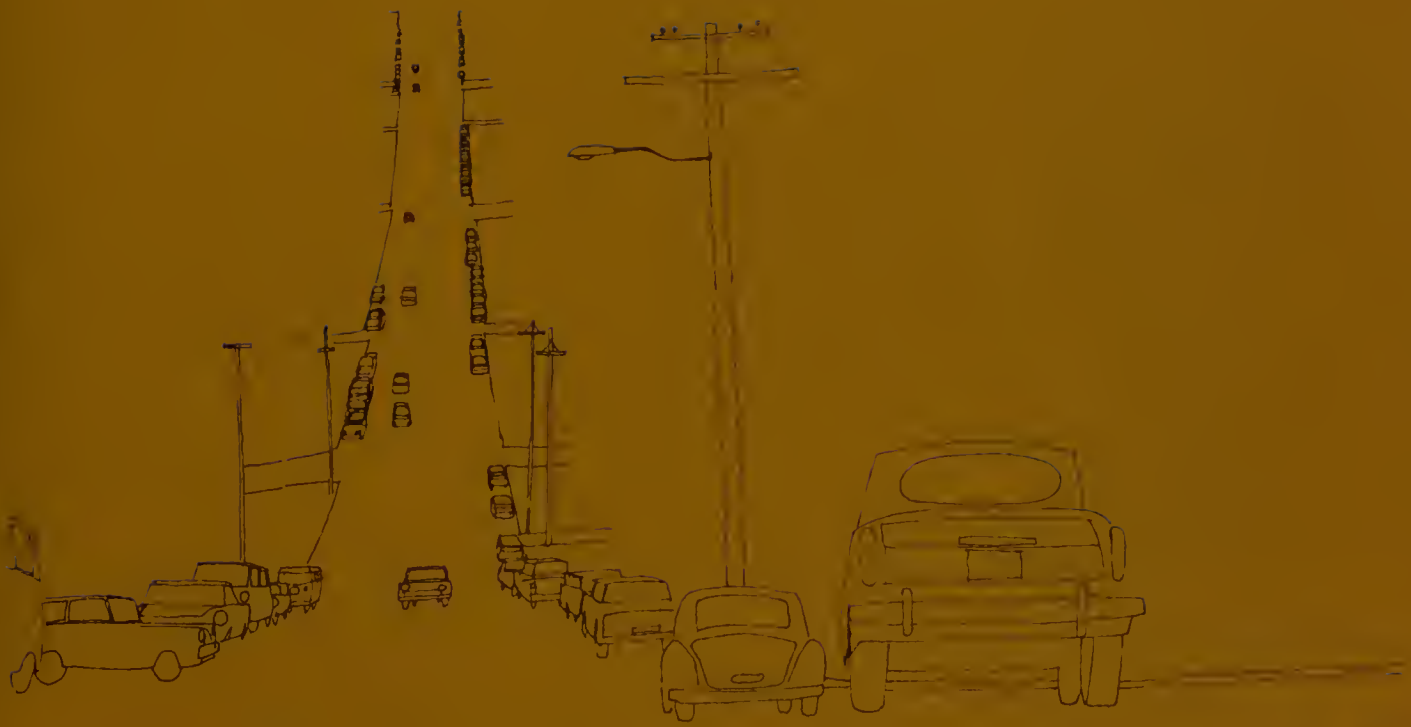
Section 2: STREETS AND BUILDINGS

Those relationships of buildings to the street facade that contribute to the interest, unity and human scale of the street.

Section 3: STREETS, BUILDINGS AND TOPOGRAPHY

Those interrelationships among building mass, street patterns and topography that improve the skyline and quality of views, and assist individual orientation.

The principles and dependent design values are presented in sets or clusters of related ideas. The range of application of the central concept in each set is intended to facilitate application to situations not included in this report.



STREETS

1

Those qualities of the street pavement, furniture and sidewalk that help make streets more pleasant comfortable places to be in.

TREES

The habitability, amenity and character of pedestrian areas are greatly enhanced by trees, more so than by any other single element.

Most residential streets, whether in older or newly developing areas, are improved by trees.

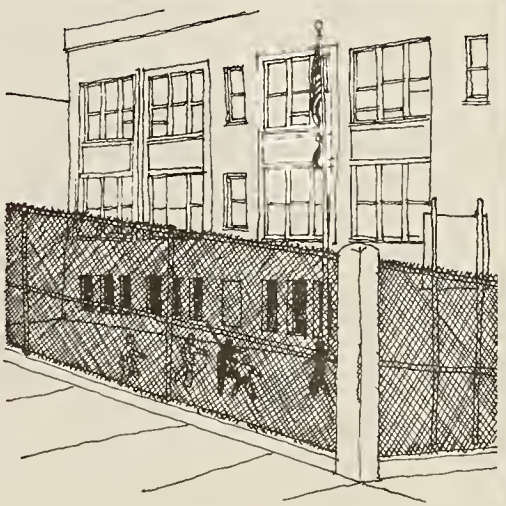
Many downtown streets are also made more pleasant by the inclusion of street trees.

DETAILS

Careful design of detail in pedestrian areas greatly increases amenity and character of streets.

The character of streets in both older and new areas is improved by attention to paving and minor planting. This comparison of two residential streets, similar in scale, indicates the potential for improvement. Care must be taken not to create a chaotic effect by the proximity of too many unrelated kinds of street details.

Well-designed street furniture, railings, and other details contribute to the character of pedestrian areas.

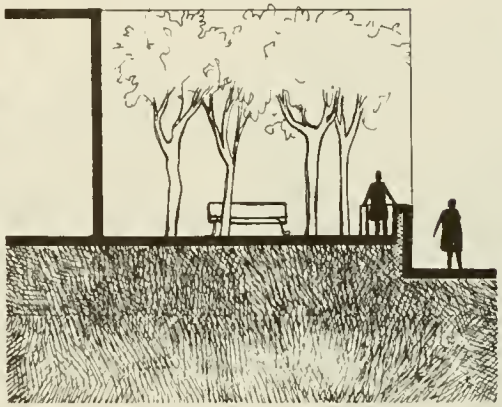


Chain-link fencing, on the other hand, is an example of detail which detracts significantly from public amenity.

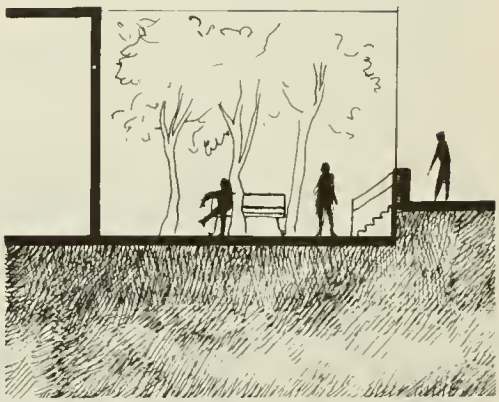
CHANGE OF LEVEL

In the design of new pedestrian areas, changes of level can add greatly to interest and amenity if a reasonable relationship between levels is maintained. Most important is the visual connection between levels, in order to provide that the experience of being on one level is enhanced by awareness of the other(s).

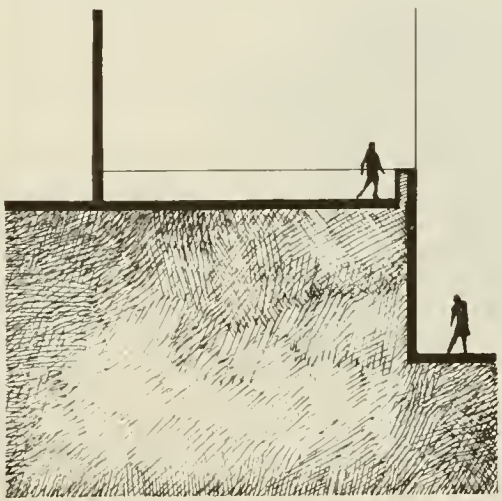
A space slightly above street level gives a sense of overlook and advantage to its occupants while the passerby retains visual connection and interest.



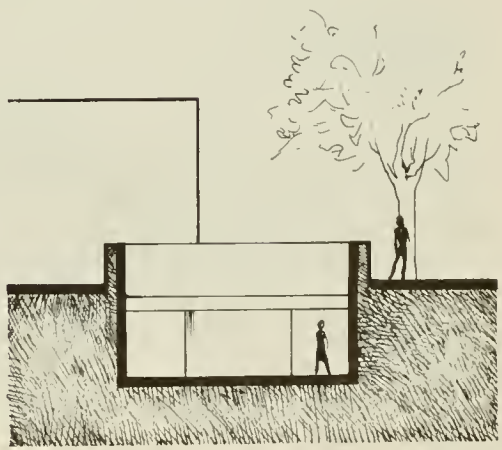
A space slightly below street level gives a sense of intimacy and enclosure to its occupants as well as a sense of advantage or overlook and views to the passerby on the sidewalk.



A space too far above street level loses visual contact with the street.

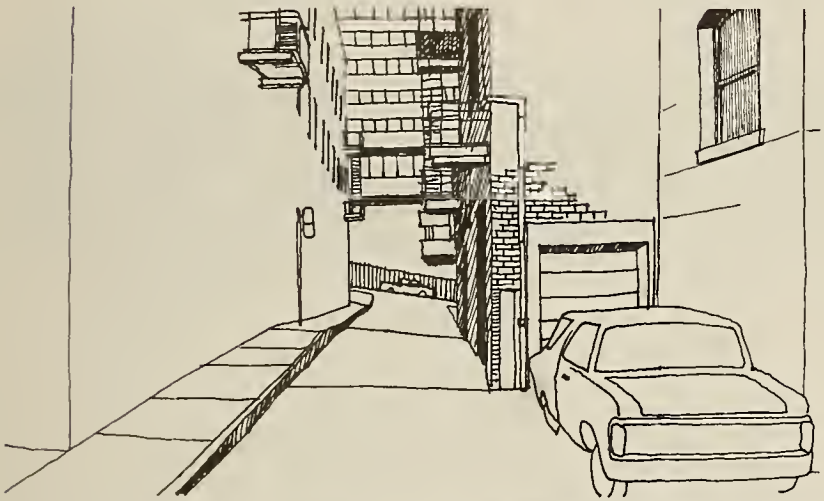


A small space too far below street level is uncomfortable to its occupants and suitable only as a place of movement or access.



USE OF STREET SPACE

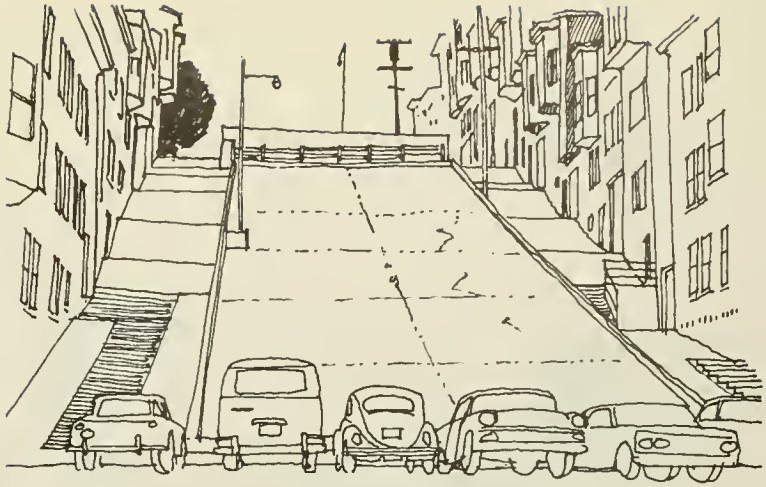
Appropriate and efficient human use of underused urban land greatly increases amenity with comparatively little investment.



Alleys and other minor ways in downtown areas which are both accessible and usable as part of the general network of pedestrian ways are potential areas of activity and interest. Large new downtown projects providing additional mid-block pedestrian shortcuts are similar opportunities.

Planting and paving treatment, coupled with more active uses in the adjacent buildings, form a commercial and/or office mall. The intimate pedestrian scale offers a welcome contrast to the wider streets around.

Street rights-of-way, both existing and new, on hills which are too steep for cars are also useless for people if they are covered with concrete.



Such a right-of-way which is heavily planted, however, is a useful and attractive small park.

A hillside park can offer both quiet sitting areas with a view and unusual recreational facilities taking advantage of the hill, such as a long slide for children.

Extremely wide streets in residential areas devote excessive space to the automobile at the expense of pedestrians, and encourage speeding, creating a safety hazard as well.

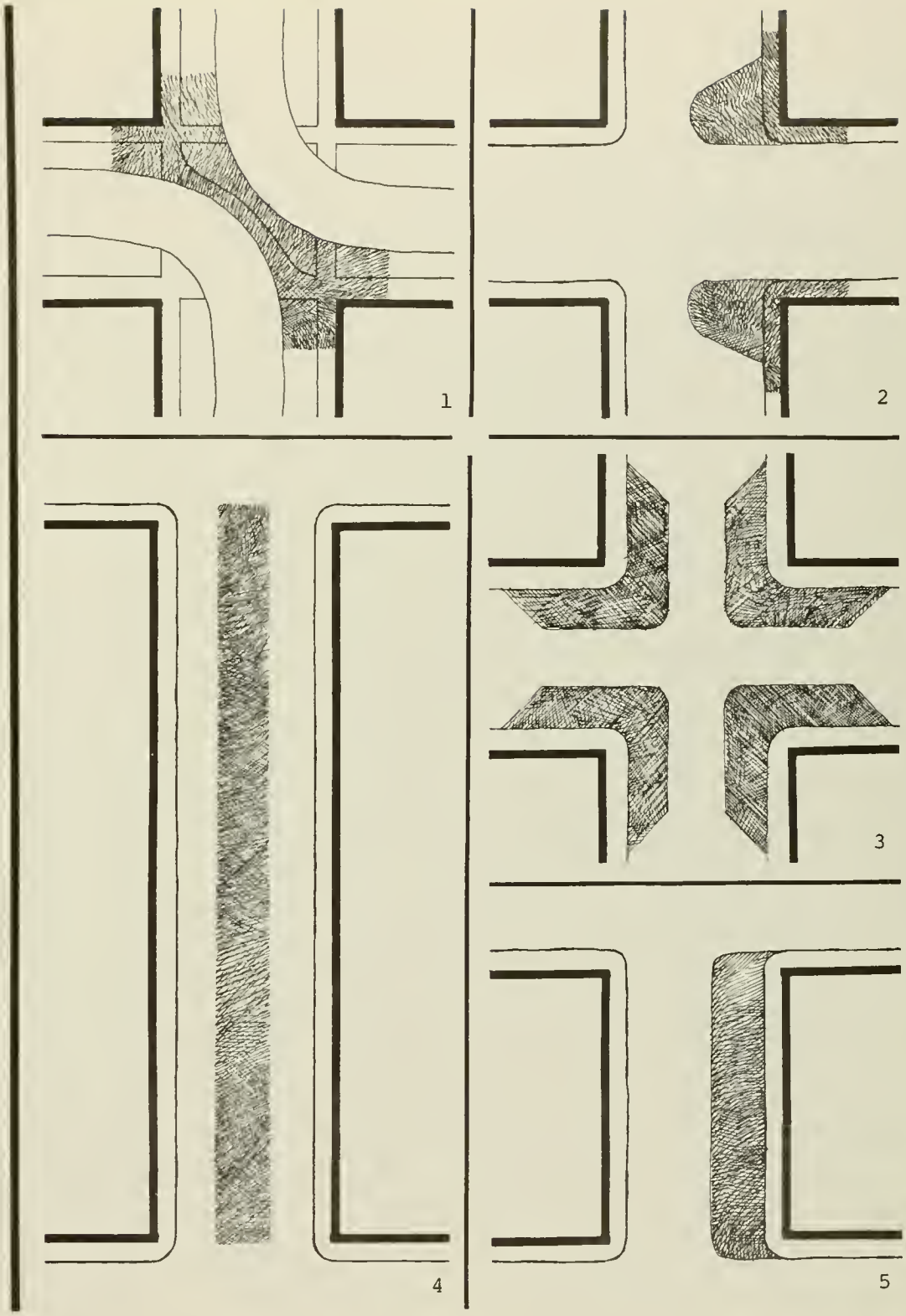
Redesign of such areas to provide more space for recreation and planting adds greatly to the character and amenity of the neighborhood. Newly developing areas can also provide such amenity as part of their street layout.

A variety of possibilities exists for modification of wide rights-of-way to increase pedestrian comfort, safety, and convenience.

Diagonal pedestrian connectors (1) prevent through traffic, thereby decreasing traffic volume in residential neighborhoods, and may be planted and landscaped.

"Chokers" in a variety of configurations (2, 3) slow traffic at intersections, making street crossing easier, and may provide space for neighborhood recreation and planting. A planted center strip (4) turns a wide street into a boulevard, particularly if heavily planted, and makes street crossing safer by separating the lanes of traffic.

Extended sidewalk area on one side (5) provides the largest and most useful space for recreation.



STREETS & BUILDINGS

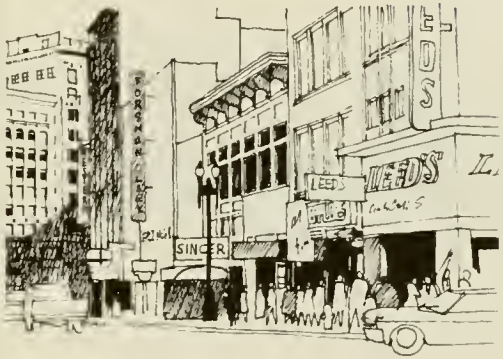
2

Those relationships of buildings to the street facade that contribute to the interest, unity and human scale of the street.

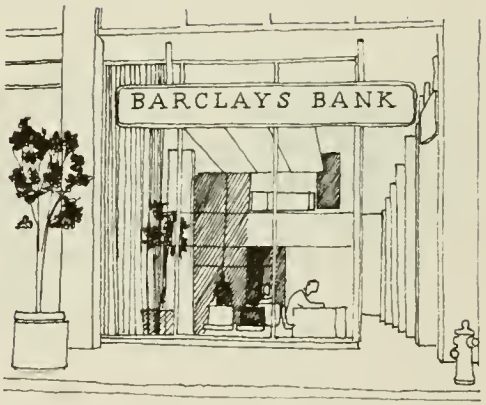
STREET LIFE

Continuity of interest and activity at ground level in buildings adjacent to pedestrian ways, especially in downtown areas, creates rich street life and enhances pedestrian experience.

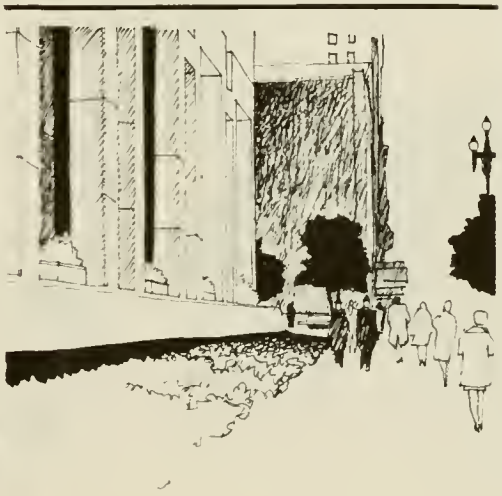
Stores contribute both visual interest and activity to the street in downtown and residential areas and are the principal generators of street life.



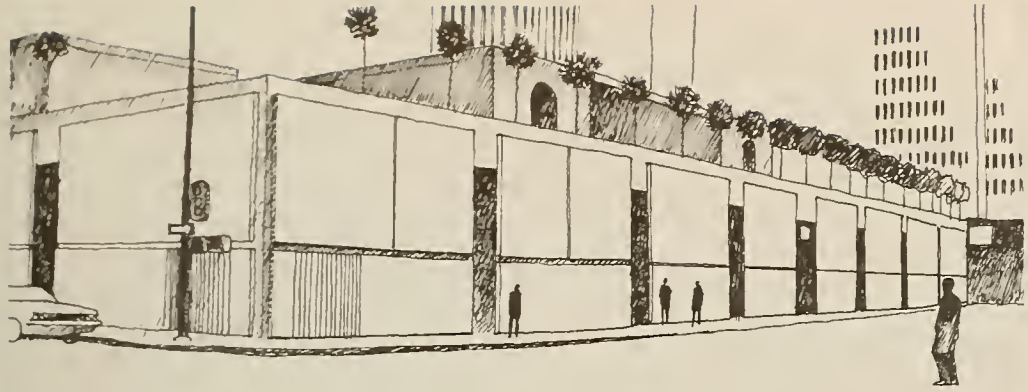
Banking halls and other places of public business also generate activity and offer visual interest to the passerby.



Office lobbies lack interest to the passerby; extensive ones in shopping areas are undesirable.

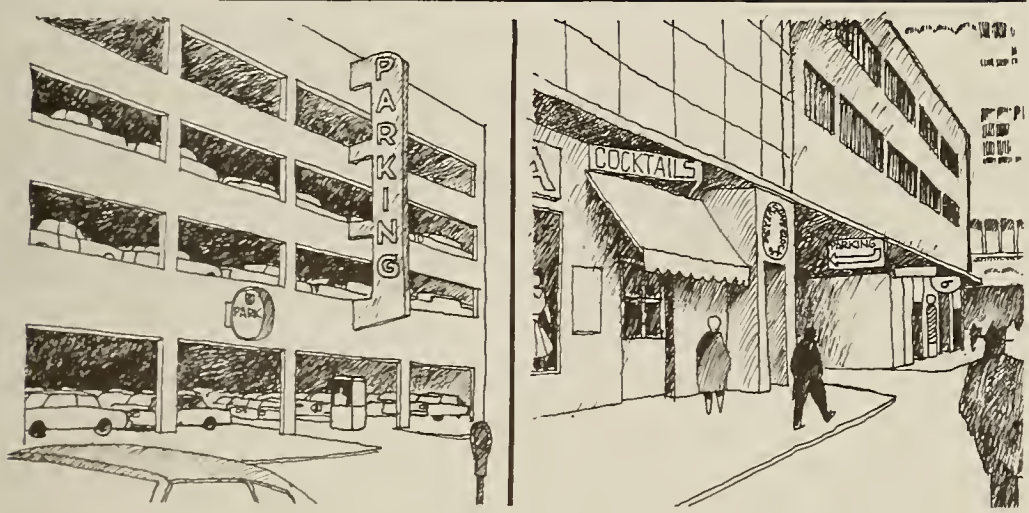


Major office buildings contribute more to street life with commercial activity at ground level.



Blank walls are dead places on the street and should be avoided.

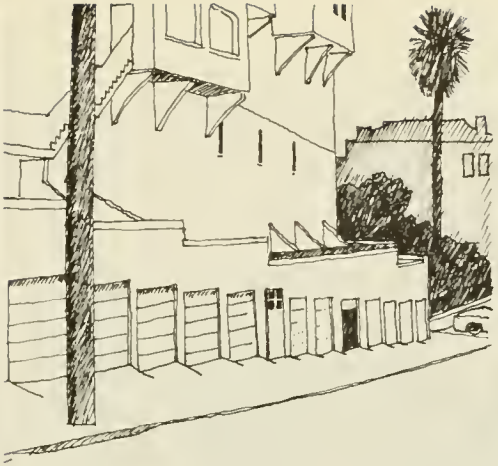
Parking lots on the street, such as those for supermarkets, diners, etc., detract from street life and impair definition of the street space. Locating the building on the corner would ameliorate this condition.

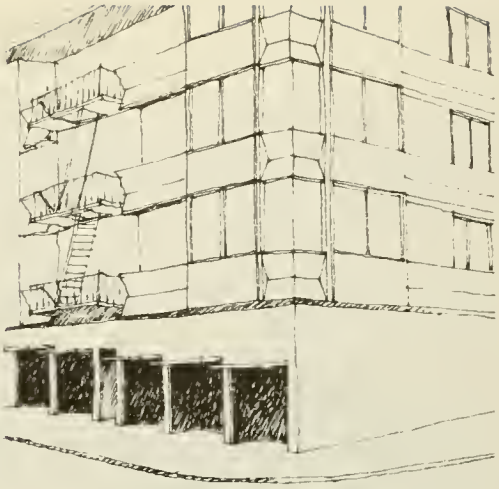


Parking garages are also dead places.

Parking garages with commercial activity at ground level maintain continuity of pedestrian activity.

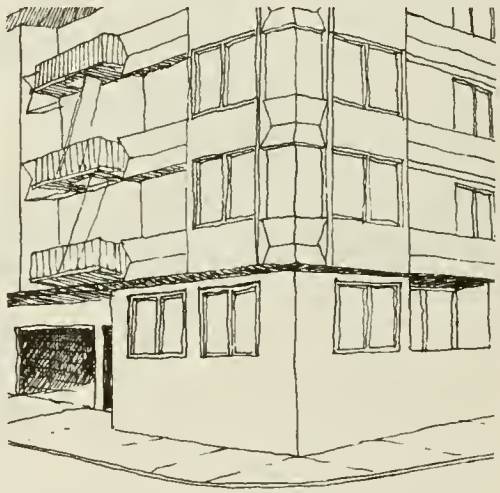
Extensive rows of garage doors are uninteresting to the pedestrian. Extensive curb cuts prevent planting or other enhancement of the street, are potentially dangerous to pedestrians, and prevent curbside parking.



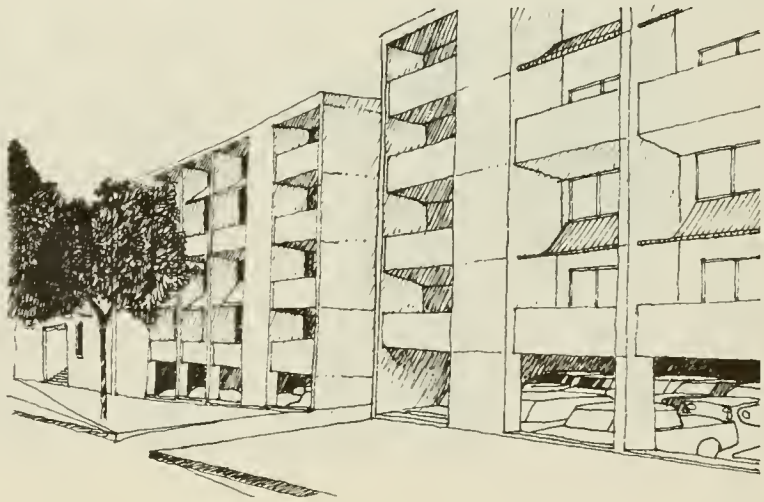


Arcades create some visual enrichment.

Minimizing entry/exit points eliminates curb cuts.



A basement garage one-half level down brings building closer to street level and increases visual interest for pedestrian.

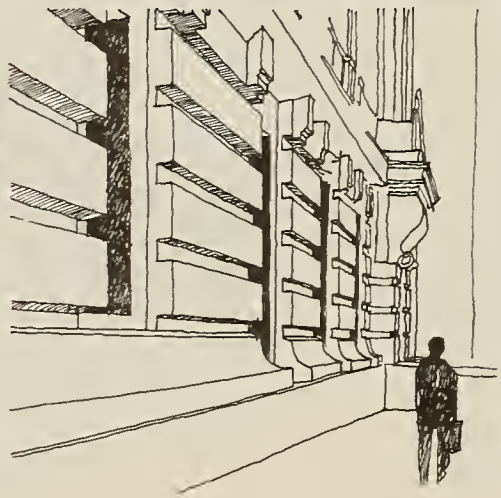


VISUAL INTEREST

Interesting external detail in buildings contributes to pedestrian amenity by providing visual interest and enrichment. This kind of development is consistent with the historic scale and texture of San Francisco.

Richly detailed facades enhance the character of the street.

Intricate entries, traditional in San Francisco, add to the visually habitable space of the street.

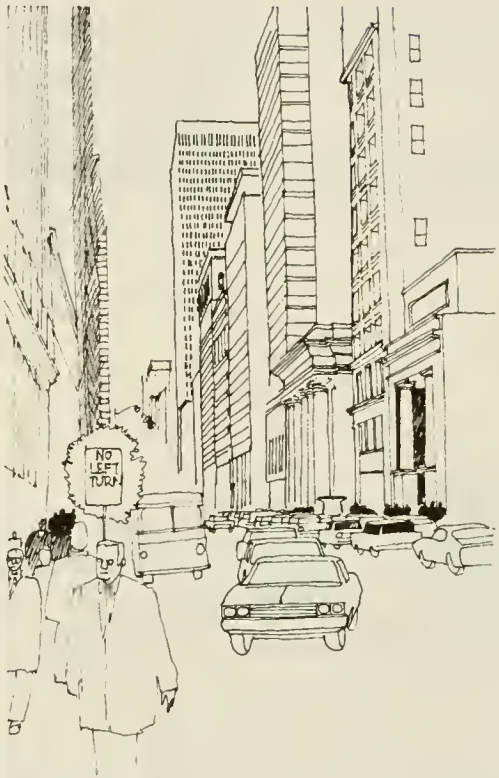


Even blank walls may possess visual interest if they are textured and scaled.

STREET DEFINITION

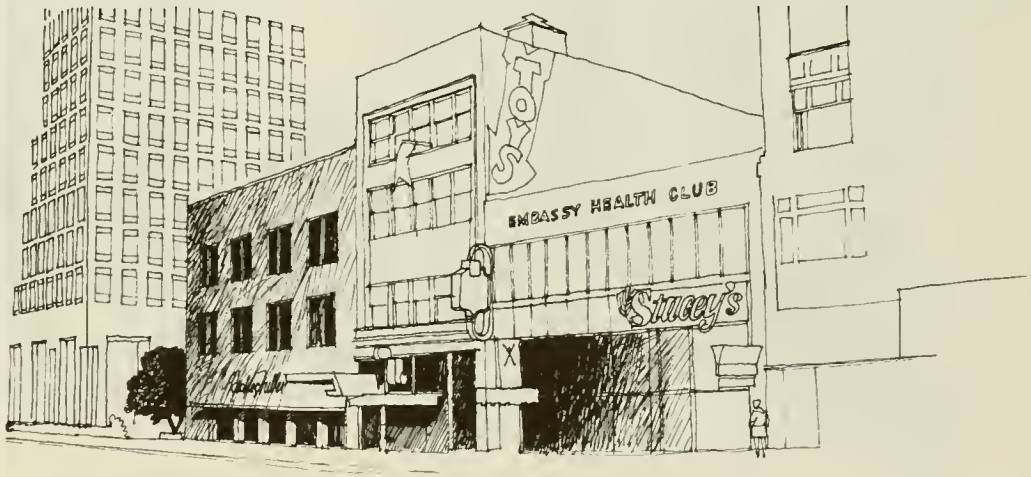
Strong and continuous street facades, typical of San Francisco, define the street space clearly and provide spatial order in the urban environment

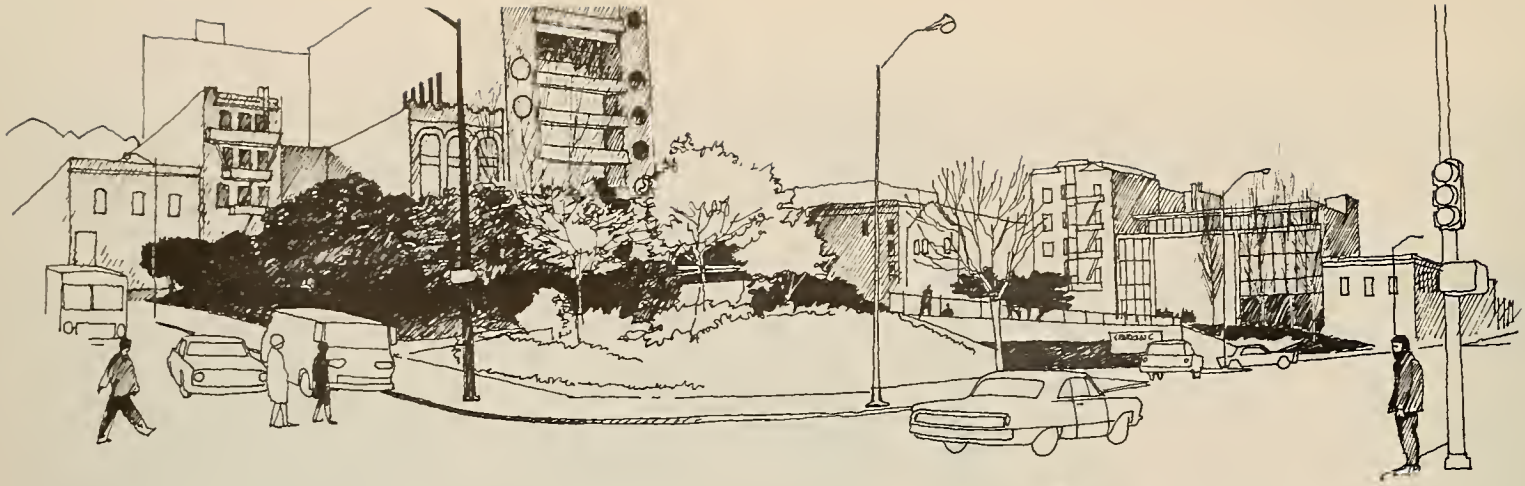
The character of downtown particularly depends upon strong street facades.



A setback in a short or poorly defined block results in poor definition of the street space.

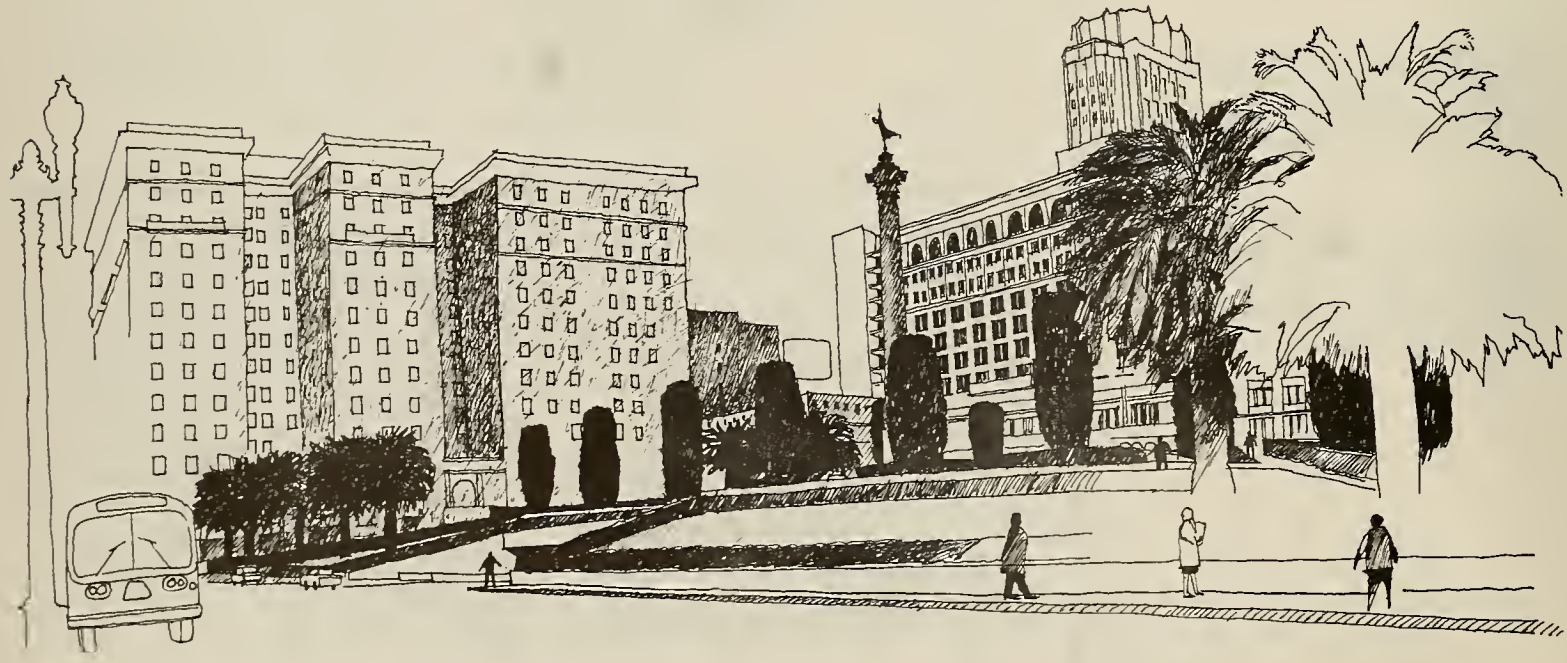
A setback or plaza in the middle of a long, well-defined block offers variety and contrast without destroying definition.

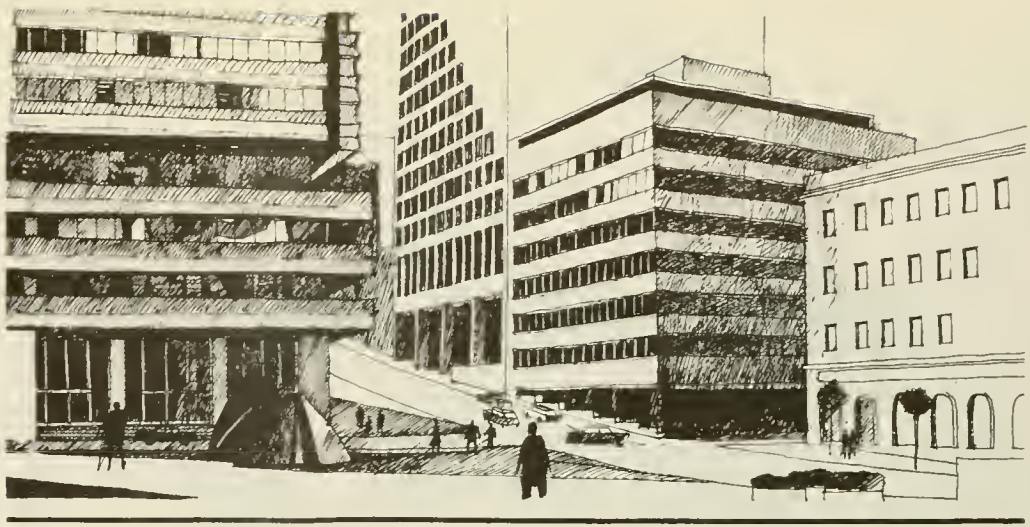




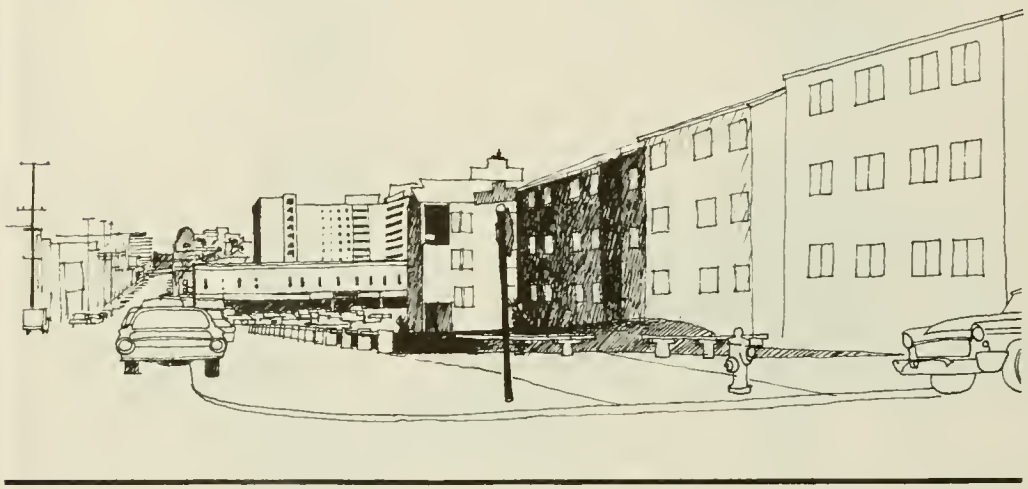
Larger squares surrounded by irregular buildings are poorly defined.

Buildings of more uniform height provide better spatial definition.





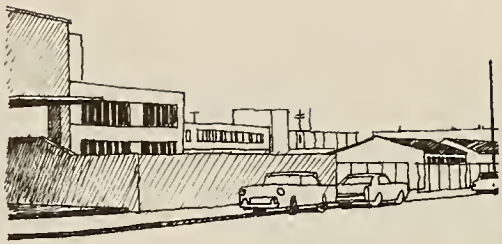
Taller buildings, clearly related in plan, define corner plazas well.



Corner plazas surrounded by low buildings are poorly defined.

Overly wide streets with low and/or scattered buildings are poorly defined.

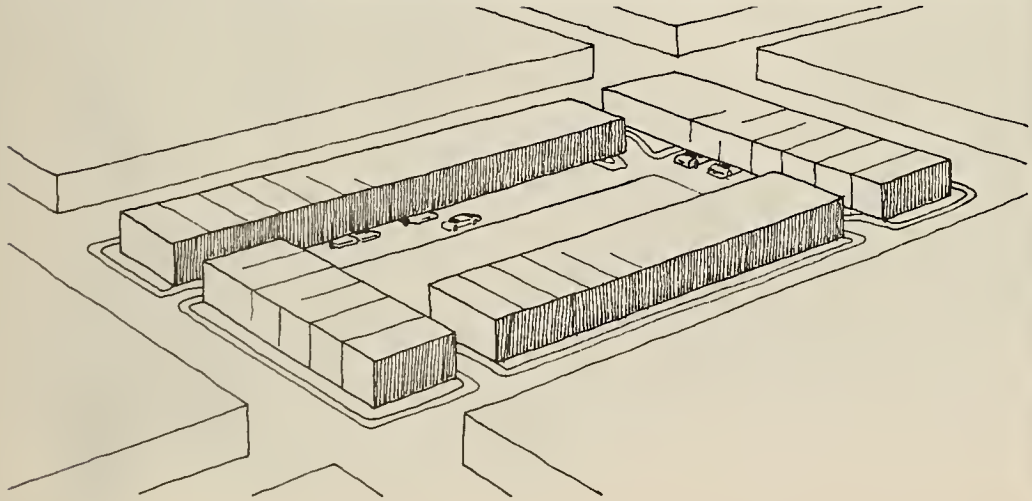
Strong street facades are also desirable in residential areas.



School with courtyard playground holds street edge; glimpses into yard offer visual drama to pedestrian.

School playground on street gives little definition; chain link fence and usually deserted playground are of little interest to pedestrian and add no visual amenity to the neighborhood.

Parking lots along the street in new housing developments neither define street nor contribute visual interest.



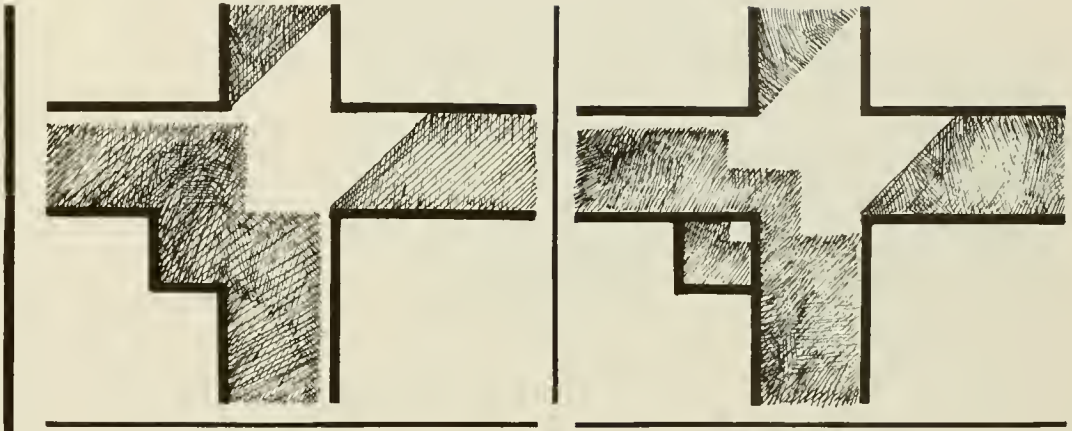
Parking under buildings or inside court allows buildings to define street, prevents visual blight of parking lot.

NATURAL LIGHT

Building size and placement determine the amount of natural light reaching street level. As a general rule, setbacks forming plazas are best located facing south or west; otherwise height reductions are preferable as a means of getting more natural light to the street.

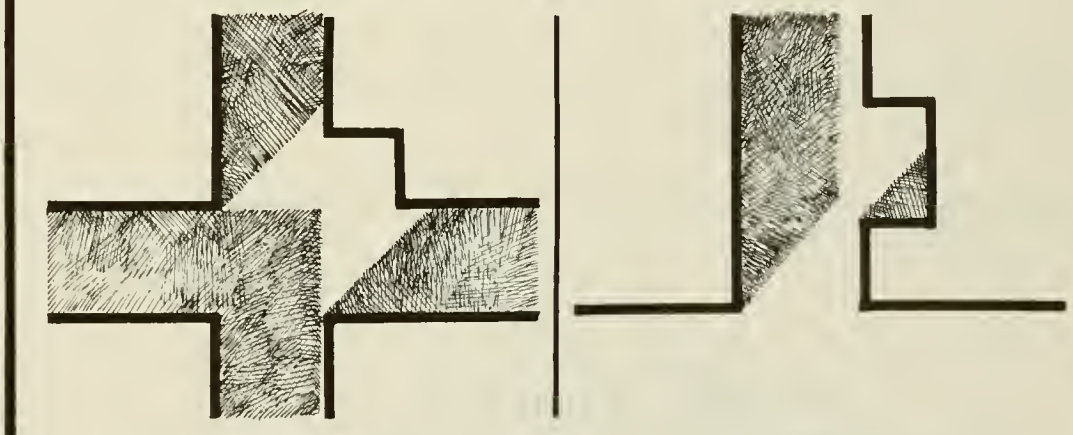
Setback on south corner lets light to the street but creates shaded corner plaza.

Height reduction on south corner lets light to street without creating shaded plaza.



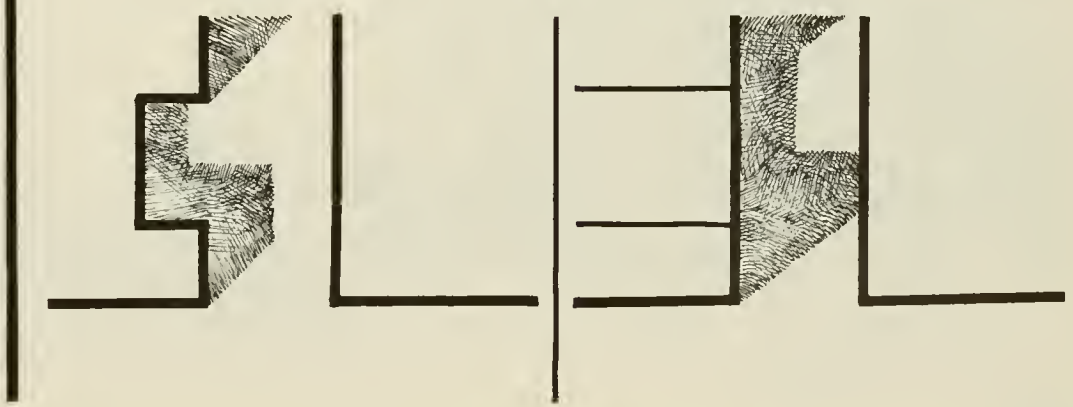
Setback on north corner creates sunny space on street.

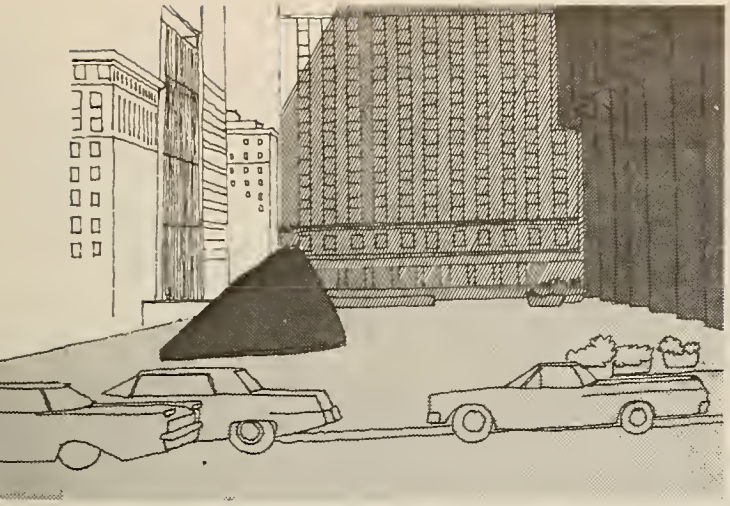
Setback on east side gets afternoon sun.



Setback on west side is sunny in the morning but shaded all afternoon.

Height reduction on west side allows light to the street without creating shaded plaza.





Plazas located directly to the north of large buildings receive no sunlight.

WEATHER PROTECTION

Buildings may provide weather protection to adjacent pedestrian spaces.

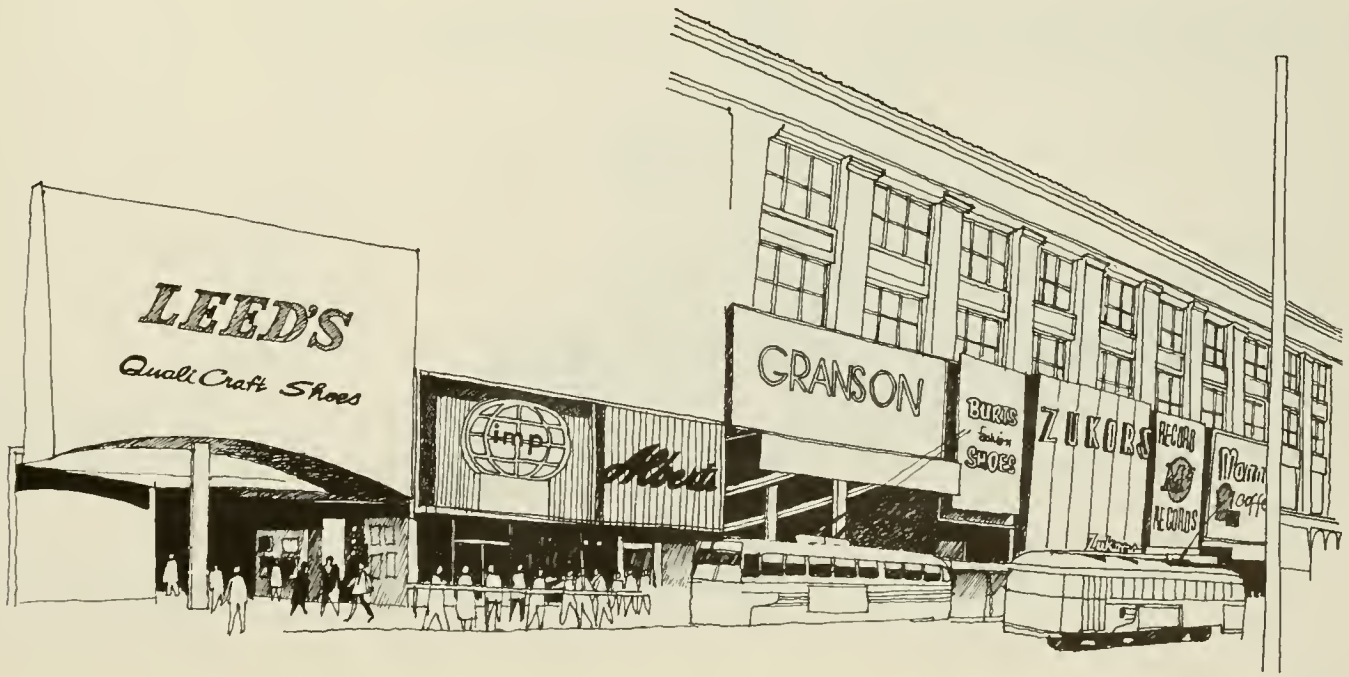
Arcades provide continuous covered access to shops and businesses and greatly enhance pedestrian comfort in inclement weather.

RENOVATIONS

Renovations and restorations of older, well-designed buildings which respect their character contribute to public amenity.

Commercial remodeling which respects existing spatial and structural order preserves character and identity of both store and building as well as offering effective contrast of old and new.

Commercial signs covering building facade destroy original character of building and create a chaotic streetscape.



Renovation which obscures original detail, etc., detracts from character and interest of street.

Restoration of older house which maintains original materials and details preserves character and interest of street.

SCALE & CHARACTER

Older areas may depend upon some uniformity of detail and scale to maintain character. Newer areas may require introduction of contrasting elements to achieve character and interest.

New blank facades introduced into areas of older, more detailed buildings impair neighborhood character.

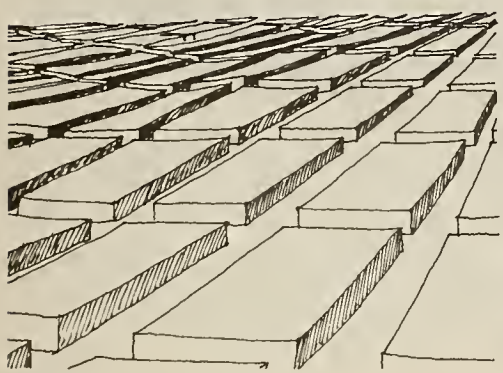
Newer buildings using materials with strong texture and scale are less intrusive in older areas.

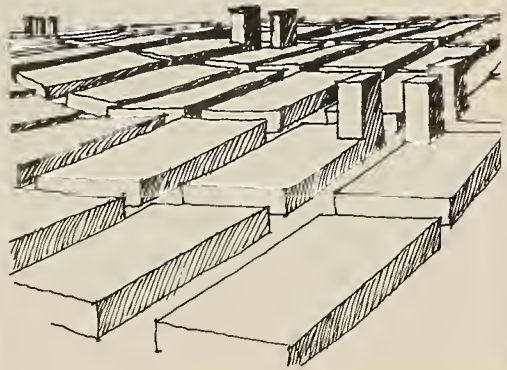
Visually strong buildings which contrast with their surroundings impair character of area.

Larger buildings which are themselves fine-grained blend into fine grain areas, particularly on hills.

Areas of fine grain and small scale suffer when large, new buildings are introduced into them, particularly when the area is small and no transition between small and large is made.

Transition elements which maintain a continuity of height and scale preserve character better.

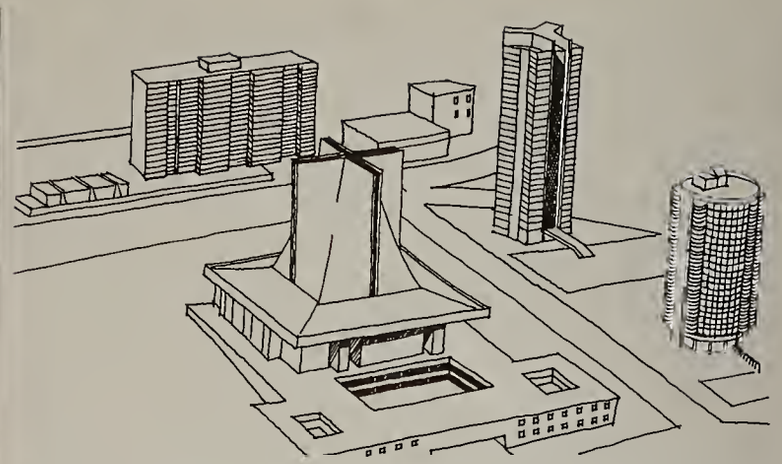




Large areas of similar streets and buildings, particularly undistinguished ones, result in unrelieved monotony.

Larger buildings in such areas provide desirable variety, contrast and points of orientation.

The use of unusual shapes for office or apartment buildings detracts from the clarity of urban form by competing for attention with buildings of greater public significance. The juxtaposition of several such unusual shapes may create visual disorder.



A building situated in a visually dominant position whose exterior appearance is blank and uninteresting damages the visual character of the surrounding area.

The traditional image of San Francisco, of light-colored, fine-scale buildings, is threatened by new construction of large buildings which are dark in color or bulky in form.

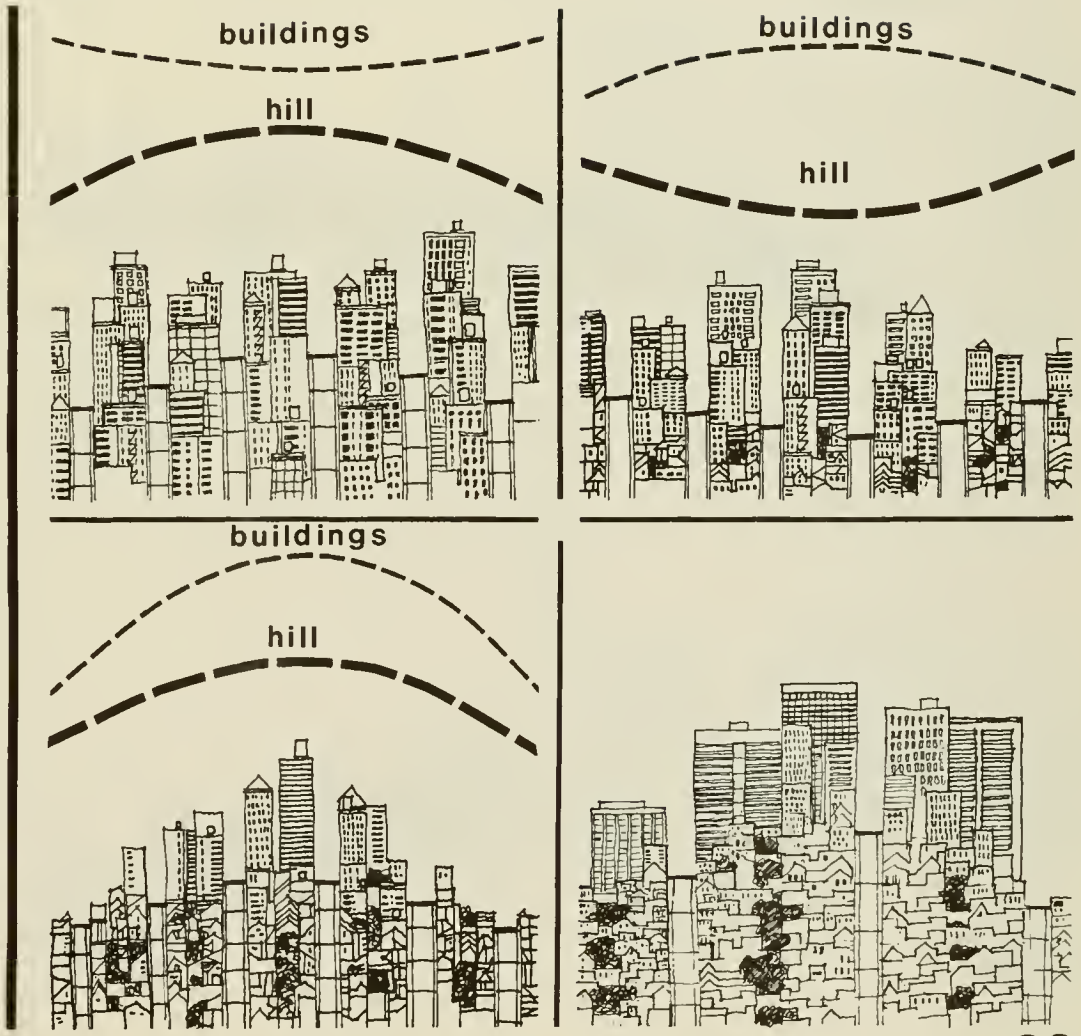
STREETS, BUILDINGS & LAND

3

Those interrelationships among building mass, street patterns and topography that improve the skyline and quality of views, and assist individual orientation.

TOPOGRAPHY

Street layout and building form which are unresponsive to topography reduce clarity of city form and image.

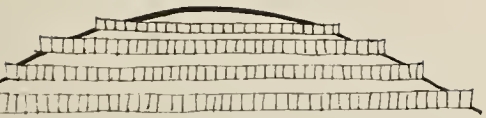


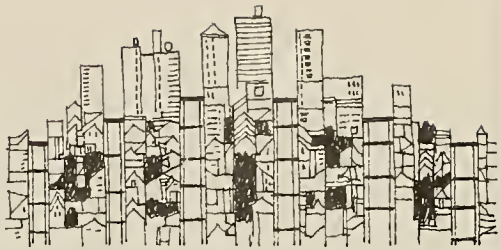
Higher buildings on slopes of hill obscure hill form.

High buildings in valley obscure distinction between hills.

Higher, slender buildings near crown of hill emphasize hill form.

Bulky buildings on hill-top reduce hill to podium.





Contour streets on hill align buildings to create striated image, destroying hill form.

Grid streets on hill align buildings so their aggregate image reinforces hill form.

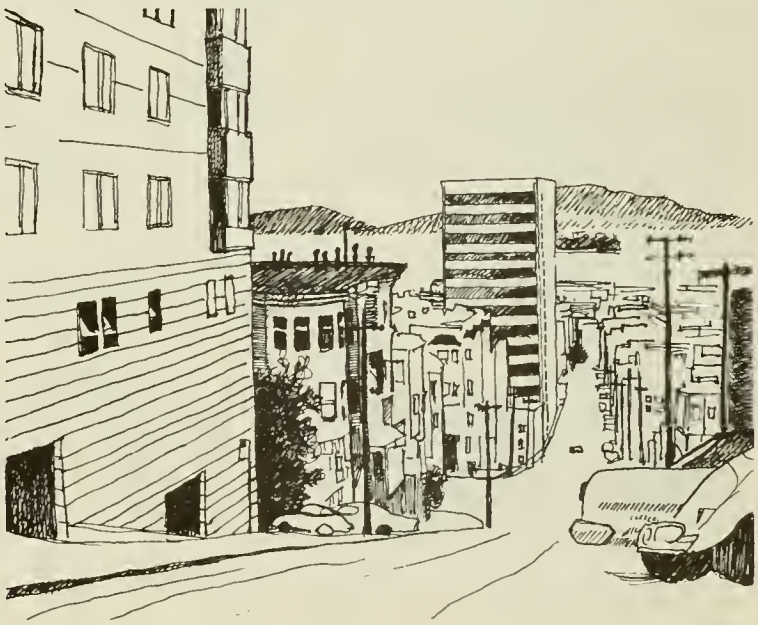
Buildings on downhill side of street on stilts do not relate to ground visually or functionally, and create useless space underneath.

Buildings which meet the ground relate to hill form better.

VIEWS

Street layout and building placement and massing determine the quality of views from public spaces.

Tall buildings on top of hill allow clear view down street.



Tall buildings on slopes of hill severely restrict views from above.

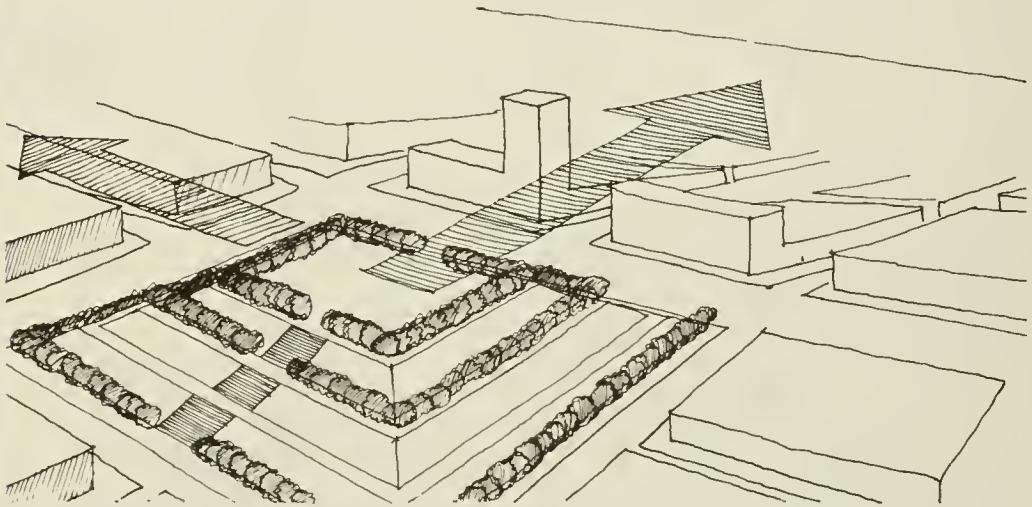
Contour streets on hill with buildings on downhill side prevent views from street.

Intersection of contour streets on hill closed by buildings prevents view.

Allowing right-of-way of intersecting streets to continue across provides view as well as a sense of direction and orientation.

Large break in buildings on downhill side allows panoramic view.

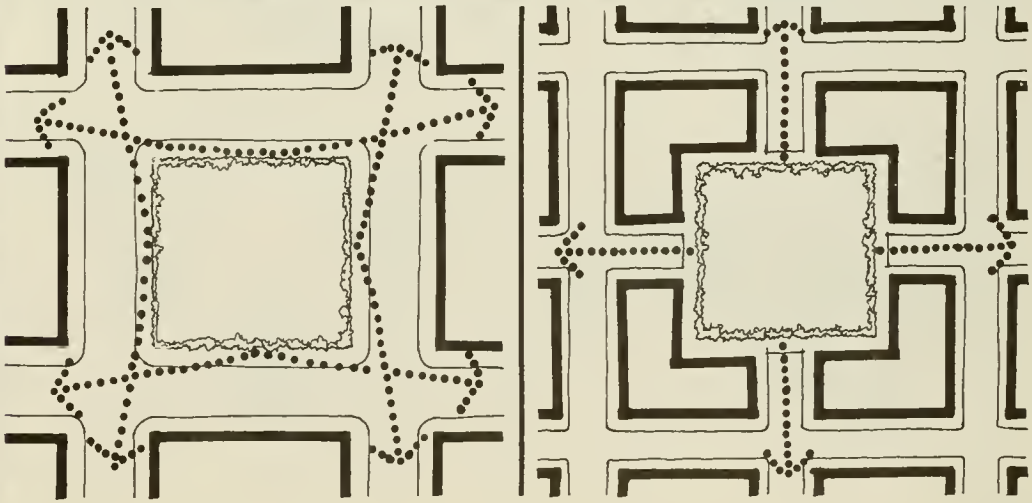
Hilltop open spaces provide panoramic views if buildings adjacent to the spaces are far enough below the viewpoint.



Hilltop open space occupying several blocks provides direct views down abutting streets.

Hilltop open space occupying single block and surrounded by buildings provides views only from its edges, obliquely down streets.

Smaller open space on hill occupying street right-of-way provides direct views down streets.



Grid streets on hills form closed vistas at a comprehensible distance. Green space closing street provides accent.

Grid streets in flat areas, without closure, create undesirable infinite vista.

Closure formed by planting or building contains street space and prevents infinite vista.

OPEN SPACE

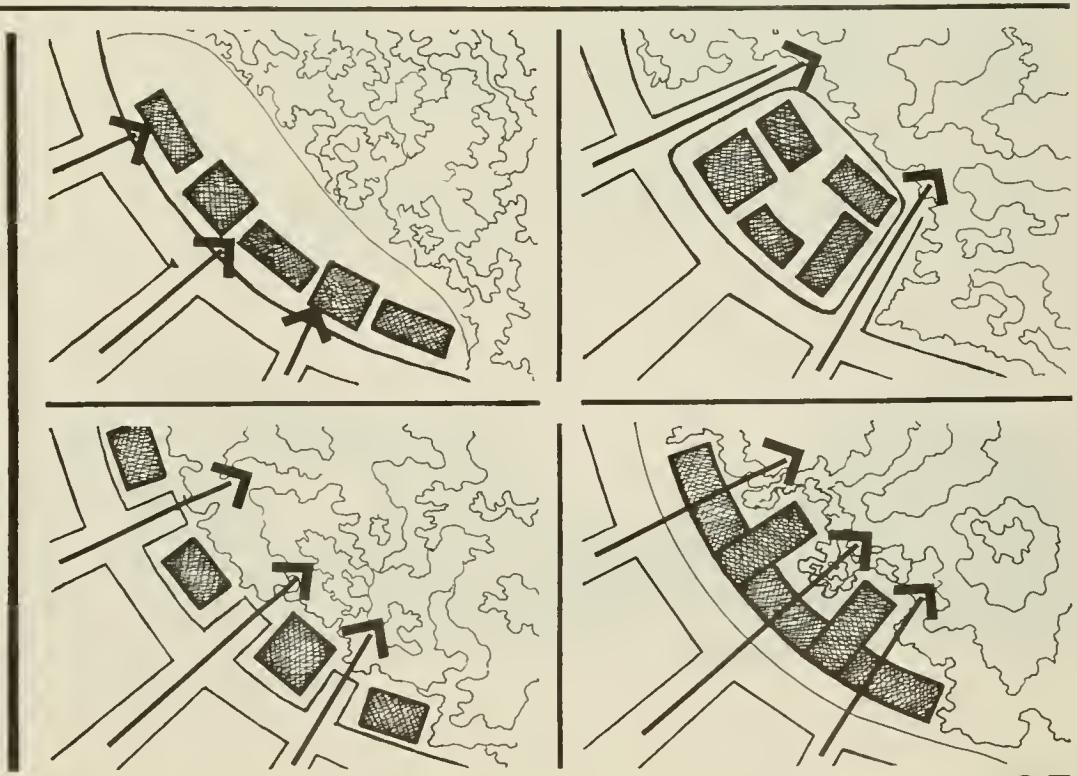
Highly visible open space presents a desirable alternative environment in strong contrast with the urban fabric.

Long, high building complex at edge of open space is strong visual barrier and destroys sense of open space from neighboring areas. (above and near right)

Building complex oriented perpendicular to street occupies less frontage, is less of a barrier. (far right)

Allowing street grid to penetrate complex provides views to open space.

Low buildings along street with higher buildings perpendicular allow view to open space if it is higher.



Weak and disorganized urban edge to park neither complements nor effectively contrasts with park.

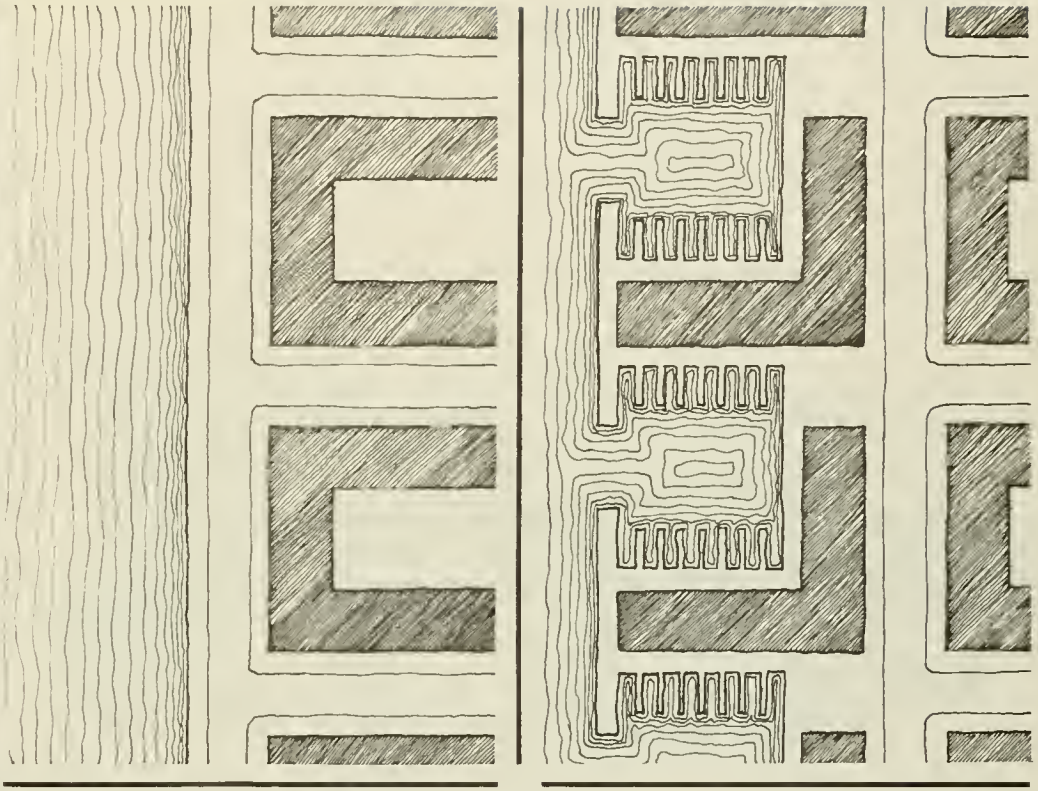
Strongly developed edge contrasts to park effectively.

WATERFRONT

The waterfront is a unique part of the city which requires appropriate, built forms to maintain its character. The interface between land and sea should be developed for maximum human use.

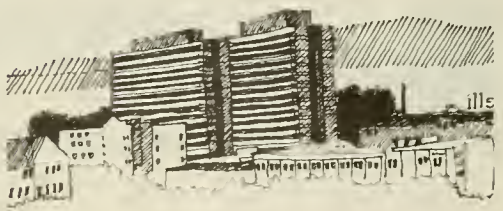
Straight waterfront edge minimizes interface of water and land.

Finger wharf configuration maximizes interface and gives maximum utility and amenity.

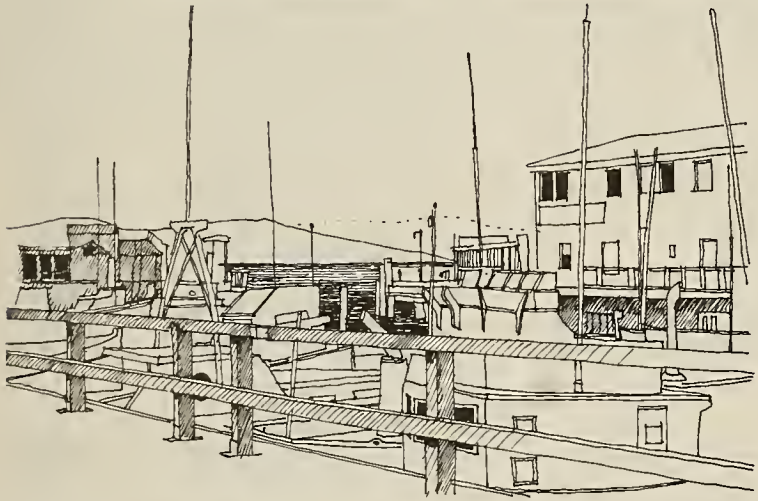


Street rights-of-way carried through to water allow views directly to waterfront, sense of contact with waterfront to surrounding area.

Tall buildings on water-front block views and destroy sense of contact with waterfront from adjacent areas.

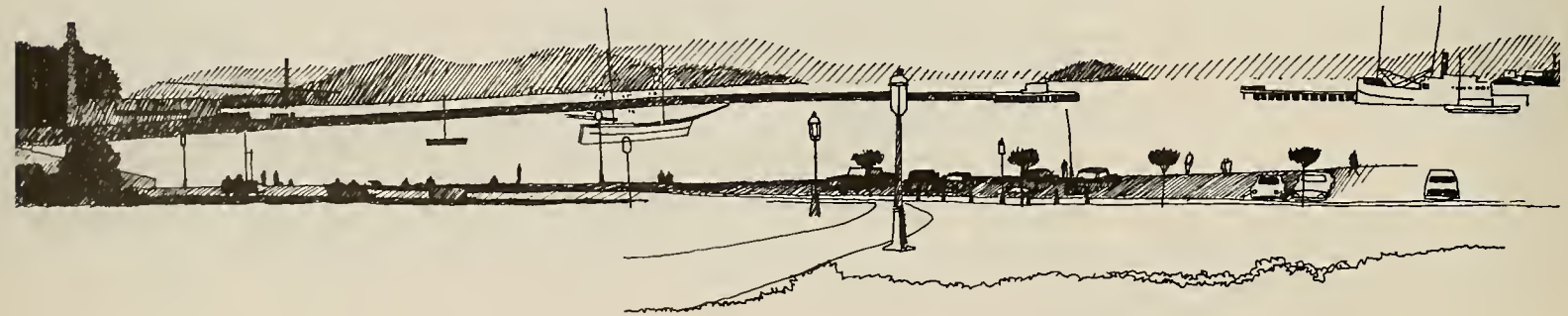


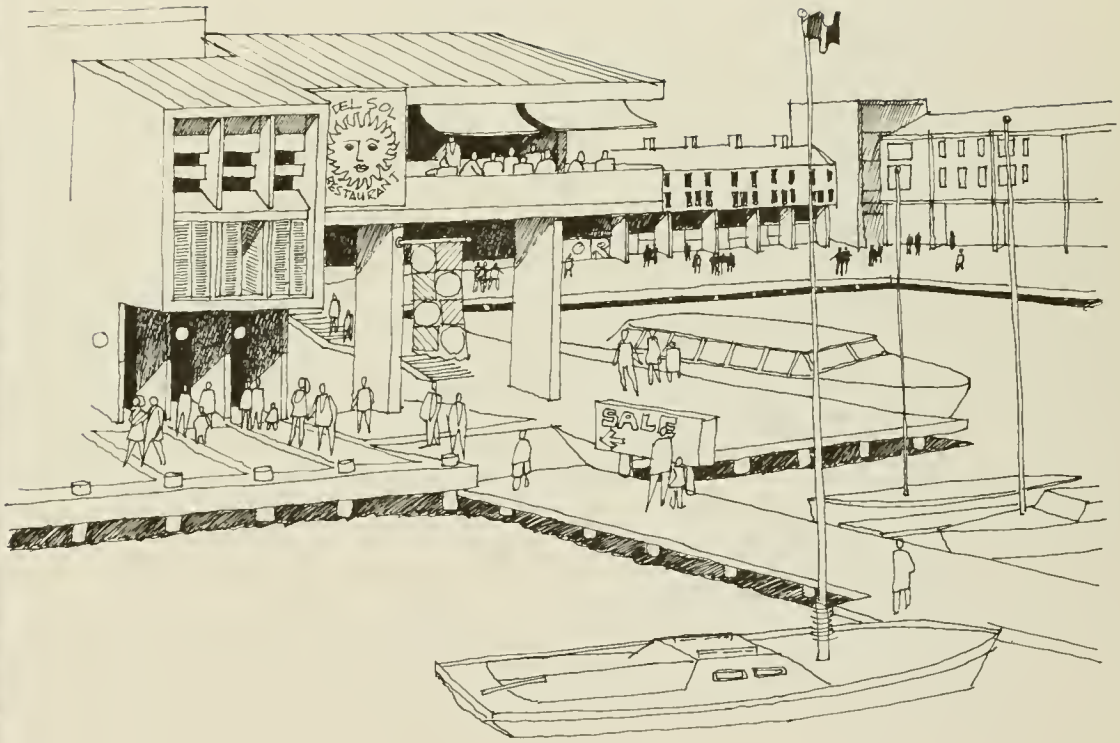
Use of the waterfront edge for car parking wastes valuable area which could better be put to use by people.



Serrated edge allows street and pedestrians access to bay but leaves private areas on water for dockside activity, housing or other uses.

Pedestrian ways out into water create unique place in the city. Open space on water provides maximum public use of waterfront.





Commercial and residential uses can add visual interest and activity to the waterfront if oriented towards the water's edge and designed to create intimate and varied spaces.

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